



From Parallels to Intersections: A Commentary on Moin's Marlowe (in Three Acts)

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Abstract

As I begin this response to Azfar Moin's wonderful essay, I find myself at a perplexing disadvantage. My first instinct, as a historian of the Ottoman Empire, is naturally to offer an "Ottoman perspective" on the questions he raises. Yet in reading Moin's piece, I note that he has cited the arguments of my own book as a reason for leaving the Ottomans entirely out of his story. How could I possibly protest, when to do so would mean that I disagree only with myself? Nevertheless I shall try—not necessarily to prove that I am wrong (although I must be!) but simply to explore the many ways in which Moin's essay, when refracted through an Ottoman lens, presents an even more surprising and colorful spectrum of possibilities. In doing so, I shall present my comments in three acts, thereby following Moin's lead in channeling the spirit of the great dramatist Marlowe.

Act I: A Tale of Two Conquerors

In keeping with the theme of "strange parallels," let me start with the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II, a.k.a. "the Conqueror" (d. 1481), a man who lived more than a century before the Mughal Emperor Akbar, yet occupied a similar place in the history of his state. Like Akbar, Mehmed was not the founder of his dynasty, but was widely credited with transforming his precarious inheritance into a bona fide world empire. Like Akbar, Mehmed was a fearsomely autocratic ruler, so contemptuous of organized religion that his own son once suggested he had "never believed in Mohammed." Like Akbar, Mehmed was drawn by these autocratic impulses to a fascination with Hermetic magic and messianic kingship. And like Akbar, Mehmed even held a special

fondness for the Virgin Mary, going so far as to commission a devotional icon of the Virgin and Child from the renowned Venetian painter Gentile Bellini.[1]

Unlike Akbar, Mehmed did not extend his reverence for the Virgin to Akbar's ancestor Timur. Quite to the contrary, Timur was perhaps the most reviled figure in all of Ottoman history, having subjected Mehmed's great-grandfather Bayezid I (a.k.a. "the Thunderbolt") to such a resounding defeat that his downfall would echo through the centuries, eventually finding its way straight into the plot of *Tamburlaine the Great*. In Marlowe's retelling of the tale, which constitutes a central part of the drama in Part One of his two-part play, Bayezid's battlefield defeat is followed by a lengthy imprisonment, during which Timur feeds him scraps and drags him around on all fours to be used as a footstool. Eventually, the humiliation is so overwhelming that Bayezid is driven to suicide, a feat he accomplishes on stage by repeatedly bashing his head against the bars of his cage.

Just how closely this version of events corresponds to the fate of the historical Bayezid remains the subject of some debate. But that Mehmed's great-grandfather was defeated, captured, and humiliated by Timur was certainly not in doubt, meaning that the idea of openly emulating Timur as a model of messianic kingship was simply out of the question.[2] Fortunately for Mehmed, he had a perfectly viable alternative in the figure of Alexander the Great, a ruler who stood, in the political imaginary of the time, as the original "Lord of the Auspicious Conjunction," the magus/conqueror par excellence of whom Timur could be only a pale imitation.

Act II: I Am Your Father

To be sure, the idea of Alexander the Great as "Lord of the Auspicious Conjunction" is likely to come as a surprise to those more familiar with the "textbook" version of Alexander, a man celebrated for his extraordinary charisma, his martial genius, and his determination to spread the seeds of Hellenic civilization across Asia, but otherwise a thoroughly human figure. While this historical Alexander was not unknown to the Ottomans of Mehmed's day, by the fifteenth century he had been long overshadowed by a literary Alexander, a very different kind of hero who figured as protagonist of the so-called "Alexandrian Romance." This "romance" was in fact a work of epic poetry, originally composed in Greek in late antique Egypt, that was only very loosely based on Alexander's historical biography. It became an inordinately popular work, and was subsequently translated into Syriac, then Arabic, and eventually into dozens of other languages as it travelled across Eurasia, being continually reinterpreted and transformed along the way.[3]

Far more than a simple literary phenomenon, it was by means of these variegated and interrelated poetic adaptations of Alexander's life that Alexander himself would become a vehicle for exploring questions of magic, messianic kingship, and political legitimacy in an explicitly Hermetic vein. In the original Greek version of the Romance, Alexander is portrayed as the illegitimate son of Nektanabo, the great Magus/Pharaoh of Egypt who had seduced and impregnated Alexander's mother by impersonating the

god Ammon. Unaware of this connection, the young Alexander travels to Egypt to be trained by Nektanabo in the science of the stars, and—in a clear foretelling of the story of Darth Vader and his son Luke—learns of their true relationship only at the hour of Nektanabo's death, after Alexander has mortally wounded him for practicing black magic. It is after this discovery that Alexander lays claim to the crown of Egypt, rendering his conquest a legitimate claiming of his birthright. Even more importantly, because he subsequently rules with white magic rather than his father's sorcery, it is through this conquest, and his later triumphs in Asia, that the ideal of the Hermetic magus as universal sovereign is finally realized.[4]

This particular version of Alexander's story seems to have been first written down in the fourth century C.E., with various Syriac and then Arabic adaptations from the original Greek circulating widely in subsequent centuries. Eventually, these spawned an entirely separate genre of Hermetic writing that flourished throughout the early centuries of Islam, portraying Alexander as a master alchemist and astrologer governing through the magical guidance of his sage/vizier Aristotle.[5] Fragments of this tradition even made their way into the pages of the Qur'an, where the figure of Zu'l-Qarneyn, or Alexander "of the Two Horns," conquers the civilized world and then builds an enormous wall to protect it from Gog and Magog, the two barbarian peoples of the apocalypse. And still another series of related adaptations in Persian form the basis for the depiction of Alexander in Ferdowsi's *Shahnama* or "Book of Kings," the national epic of medieval Iran (and, to a significant extent, the primary literary reference point for later Ottoman and Mughal high culture as well).[6]

Of course, the parallel existence of so many different manifestations of Alexander, each shifting form and melding into one another like quicksilver, is itself a quintessentially Hermetic idea. And while a modern reader might be driven to exasperation by the impossibility of separating out and making sense of each individual strand, for a ruler like Mehmed it was precisely the possibility of presenting oneself as all of these different Alexandrian personae at the very same time that was a crucial part of the attraction. This can be understood quite clearly from the list of books about Alexander that Mehmed, a renowned bibliophile, commissioned or acquired during his reign. Among the most prominent titles, for example, we find a fine illuminated copy of the Greek Alexander romance, several versions of the Persian Alexandrian epics, and two "Alexandrian" biographies of Mehmed himself: the first a Turkish-language work comparing him to the Qur'anic Alexander, and the second a text in neoclassical Greek in which Mehmed is eulogized through comparisons with the historical Alexander. Mehmed also owned a copy of Arrian's *Anabasis* (the standard Hellenistic biography of Alexander's life), and several works of Arabic philosophy based on dialogues between Alexander and Aristotle, as well as a great many titles on Hermetic esoterica, magic, prognostication, alchemy and astrology in both Arabic and Greek. For good measure, he even commissioned an anthology, in

Arabic translation, of writings by the Renaissance neo-Pagan Platonic philosopher Georgios Gemistos Plethon (d. 1452).[7]

None of this Alexandrian eclecticism makes any sense unless we realize that Mehmed, much like his Mughal counterpart Akbar, was a monarch deeply invested in the project of using millennial kingship to “raise the body of the king above the distinctions of religion,” to use Moin’s very apt description. For just as Akbar, a nominal Muslim, ruled over a vast and fractious realm in which Muslims constituted only a small minority, Mehmed too inherited an equally fractious sultanate, the subjects of which were overwhelmingly Christian. Moreover, Mehmed’s actions throughout his reign were a far cry from his reputation, forged in much later popular portrayals of his rule, as a zealous and pious “Warrior of the Faith.” His signature military achievement, for example, the conquest of Constantinople, was achieved over the objections of his madrasa-trained grand vizier (whom Mehmed promptly executed). His subsequent decision to make Constantinople his new capital was a slap in the face of his Turkish gazis, who had expected him instead to raze it to the ground. And his policy of repopulating the city with Greeks, and financing its reconstruction by seizing the assets of Muslim pious endowments, was an affront to Muslim sensibilities for which he would never be forgiven.[8]

For all these reasons, and many others, Mehmed knew that if he was to survive and prosper on his throne he would need something more powerful, more pliable, and more ecumenical than mere religion to justify his rule. Alexander offered him just such an alternative, by presenting a model of ideal rulership that allowed him to be many things to many people: a defender of classical Hellenism for the Greek-speaking bureaucrats of his new capital, a Qur’anic prophet for the Muslim gazis of his army, a paragon of justice and eloquence for the Persian-speaking literati of his court, and above all, “Lord of the Auspicious Conjunction,” a millennial sovereign who ruled not merely through birthright, custom, or piety but rather by channeling the awesome power of the stars.

Act III: Back to England, by Way of Calabria

So what does all of this have to do with Christopher Marlowe? First, it is a very long-winded way of agreeing with Moin’s argument regarding the magical undercurrents in Tamburlaine the Great, and the importance of understanding them not merely as literary abstractions but as ideas that had very real political currency in the early modern world. Yet at the same time, it is an equally long-winded way of disagreeing with the second part of Moin’s argument, namely that Marlowe “could not have used a European figure for his play because none existed in living memory.”

I say this not simply because, for Marlowe, Mehmed the Conqueror would have been a figure less remote in time than Timur, or less remote in space than Akbar. Rather, what makes Mehmed important is the fact that his reign was only the beginning of a much longer history of Ottoman millennial kingship. If anything, his grandson Selim “the Grim” (d. 1520) and his great-grandson Suleyman “the

Magnificent" (d. 1566) were even more creatively invested in presenting themselves as Alexandrian "Lords of the Auspicious Conjunction." [9] And the same could be said of Suleyman's grandson Murad III (d. 1595), who made himself famous by attempting to harness the power of the stars through the construction of a magnificent astronomical observatory in Istanbul—the largest such enterprise since the celebrated Samarkand observatory (built, by no means coincidentally, by the grandson of Timur).[10]

The example of Murad is especially relevant because it was he who occupied the Ottoman throne in 1587, the year Christopher Marlowe penned *Tamburlaine the Great*. By that time, the rule of Murad's dynasty extended over roughly a quarter of Europe—the only portion of the continent in which Muslims, Jews, and various denominations of Christians could all peacefully serve as subjects of the same sovereign. By contrast, England in the same year was living one of the darkest moments of its religious and political history, bitterly divided against itself following the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, and awaiting the inevitable invasion by sea of the Armada of the "Most Catholic" King Philip II of Spain.

Under such circumstances, it was entirely to be expected that a radical free thinker such as Marlowe would survey the grim political landscape of his native land and yearn for a different kind of ruler, one who could rise above the petty distinctions of scripture and its dreary political corollaries: inquisitions, excommunications, religious wars, edicts of expulsion, St. Bartholomew's Day Massacres, and so forth. But in searching for such an alternative, we must take care not to imagine that he necessarily had to probe the farthest reaches of the "exposed zone," or embark on a journey of the mind to a long-lost Turco-Mongol court, in order to find a political system that was sufficiently different from the "hemmed-in monarchies" of Western Europe. Instead, to find an example of a ruler powerful enough not to insist on the religious conformity of his subjects, who sat on the throne of universal monarchy as "Lord of the Auspicious Conjunction," Marlowe needed to travel no farther than the Danube.

And yet, as natural as it may have been to consider in private that the Ottoman system was a cure for Western Christendom's collective ills, to say so in public was another matter entirely, best undertaken only by those willing to pay the ultimate price. To understand the grave risks inherent in such an undertaking, one need only look to the figure of Tommaso Campanella, one of the last and arguably the greatest of all Renaissance Hermetic philosophers, and a man born just four years Marlowe's junior in the hills of southern Italy.

Today, Campanella is famous first and foremost for *The City of the Sun*, his vision of a perfect society governed in accordance with the "Great Legislators" Jesus, Moses, Osiris, Jove, Mercury, and Mohammed under the guidance of a Sun King.[11] Yet while this is a text typically studied as a work of Utopian philosophy, the ideas it contains reflect a life of extreme political activism rather than ivory tower abstraction. In fact, by his early twenties, Campanella's ideas were already provocative enough to warrant his first serious encounter with the inside of a jail. And by 1599, at the age of

30, he became the ideologue of a radical anti-monarchical rebellion in his native Calabria. The stated goals of the uprising were remarkable: to overthrow Spanish rule with help from the Ottoman fleet, and then to declare an independent Calabrian Republic with the Ottoman Sultan as its protector (for which a rough precedent already existed in the city-state of Dubrovnik).

Sadly for Campanella, the insurrection was discovered almost before it had begun. Betrayed by two of his co-conspirators, Campanella was arrested, put on trial, and declared insane for his beliefs (the only realistic alternative to execution for sedition). He would spend the next twenty-seven years in confinement, where he wrote *The City of the Sun* while continuing to practice magic from his cell.[12]

Might Campanella's downfall have served as a warning to Marlowe, as he took up his pen and began to formulate an equally radical set of ideas? Since the Calabrian uprising did not take place until after Marlowe's death, and the two are not believed to have ever directly crossed paths, the simple answer is no. But neither Campanella's ideas nor the heavy price he paid for expressing them were by any means unique in late sixteenth-century Europe.[13] And by recognizing this reality, we can gain insight into the possible reasons why Marlowe, however daring he may have been as a dramatist, might still have preferred to use the Ottoman dynasty's long-dead antagonist Timur—rather than the Ottoman sultan himself—as the ostensible vessel for his Renaissance Magus.

But scratch just beneath the surface of Marlowe's great play, and compare the deeds of its idiosyncratic characters with the actual historical record, and one cannot help but wonder if the inconsistencies that emerge are intended to be obvious, inviting us to second guess the author's true sympathies. How else to explain Marlowe's depiction of Tamburlaine as the son of a humble shepherd, and Bayezid as a blue-blooded sultan, when in reality it was Timur who was of the more exalted lineage? How else to explain his portrayal of Tamburlaine as the "Scourge of God" and the burner of Qur'ans, when the real Timur was acclaimed as "the Sword of Islam" even by Bayezid's soldiers? Finally, and most suggestively, how to explain the basic narrative confusion of Tamburlaine's conquests when compared to the historical record? For unlike Marlowe's stage hero, the real Timur never conquered Egypt, nor did he ever do battle with the Emperor of Persia. Instead, it was Alexander the Great who did those things. Until, nearly two thousand years later, the Ottoman sultans would follow in his footsteps.

Epilogue

Having by now presented my "Ottoman Perspective" in sufficiently cantankerous detail, let me conclude on an altogether different note, by emphatically agreeing with Moin's basic point that the kinds of connections explored in his essay are as fundamentally important as they are pathetically understudied. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that almost none of what I have written in the pages above would have ever even occurred to me had I not recently read Moin's magnificent book, *The*

Millennial Sovereign. And so, if I began this excursion perplexed to find my own book used against me, it is in a much different spirit—one of admiration and deep intellectual debt—that I hope to have given back to Moin a small dose of his own magical medicine.

Notes

The standard work on Mehmed's life is still Franz Babinger's (now very outdated) *Mehmed the Conqueror and his Time*, translated by Ralph Manheim (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978). On Mehmed's interest in the Virgin Mary, and his son's suspicions regarding his religious beliefs, see Julian Raby, "A Sultan of Paradox: Mehmed the Conqueror as Patron of the Arts," *Oxford Art Journal* 5(1) (1982): 3–8. ♣

On Bayezid's demise and its complicated aftermath, see Dimitris Kastritsis, *The Sons of Bayezid: Empire Building and Representation in the Ottoman Civil War, 1402–23* (Leiden: Brill, 2007). ♣

In addition to the works of Subrahmanyam and Ng already cited by Moin, see Richard Stoneman, *Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010). ♣

For an English translation of the Greek text, see Richard Stoneman, *The Greek Alexander Romance* (London: Penguin Books, 1981). ♣

For a translation of one of the most influential medieval texts in this genre, see *Book of the Treasure of Alexander: Ancient Hermetic Alchemy and Astrology*, ed. Christopher Warnok, trans. Nicholaj de Mattos Frisvold (Washington D.C.: Lulu.com, 2010). ♣

For an overview of Alexander as depicted in the Qur'an and the literature of Iran, see A. Abel, "Iskandar-nama," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., vol. 4 (Leiden: Brill, 2002). For the most important Ottoman adaptation of the medieval Persian epic, penned in the early fifteenth century, see *İskendernâme'den Seçmeler*, ed. Yasar Akdogan (Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı, 2000). ♣

For an overview of these works and a discussion of Mehmed's larger pattern of patronage, see Julian Raby, "Mehmed the Conqueror's Greek Scriptorium," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 37 (1983): 15–34; and Gülru Necipoğlu, "Visual Cosmopolitanism and Creative Translation: Artistic Conversations with Renaissance Italy in Mehmed II's Constantinople," *Muqarnas* 29 (2012): 1–81. For a detailed study of the Greek illuminated manuscript (whose pictures were re-glossed with Turkish captions), see Dimitris Kastritsis, "The Trebizond Alexander Romance (Venice Hellenic Institute Codex Gr.5): The Ottoman Fate of a 14th-Century Illustrated Byzantine Manuscript," *Journal of Turkish Studies* 36 (2011): 103–31. ♣

For an introduction to Mehmed's policies, see the classic study of Halil Inalcik, "The Policy of Mehmed the Conqueror toward the Greek Population of Istanbul and the Byzantine Buildings of the City," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 23–24 (1969–1970): 231–49. ♣

See Cornell Fleischer, "The Lawgiver as Messiah: The Making of the Imperial Image in the Reign of Süleymân," in *Soliman le magnifique et son temps*, ed. Gilles Veinstein (Paris: La Documentation Française, 1992), 159–77. ↗

On Murad's observatory, see Baki Tezcan, "Some Thoughts on the Politics of Early Modern Ottoman Science," in *Beyond Dominant Paradigms in Ottoman and Middle Eastern/North African Studies: A Tribute to Rifa'at Abou-El-Haj*, ed. Donald Quataert and Baki Tezcan (Istanbul: İSAM, 2010), 135–56. ↗

Tommaso Campanella, *La Città del Sole: Dialogo Politico/The City of the Sun: Political Dialogue*, trans. Daniel John Donno (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981). ↗

For a study of Campanella's life and works, see John M. Headly, *Tommaso Campanella and the Transformation of the World* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997). ↗

For another roughly contemporary hermetic thinker, similarly declared insane and sentenced to decades of confinement for, among other things, having too many complimentary things to say about the Ottomans, see Marion L. Kuntz, *Guillaume Postel, Prophet of the Restitution of All Things: His Life and Thought* (London: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981). ↗